



ASHA

American
Speech-Language-Hearing
Association

July 10, 2023

The Honorable Tom Cole
Chair, Committee on Rules
H-312, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable James McGovern
Ranking Member, Committee on Rules
H-152, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chair Cole and Ranking Member McGovern:

On behalf of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), I write to share our position on amendments submitted for consideration to H.R. 2670, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024, that would restrict access to gender-affirming care for servicemembers, dependents, and veterans, potentially including gender-affirming voice therapy provided by speech-language pathologists (SLPs).

ASHA is the national professional, scientific, and credentialing association for 228,000 members and affiliates who are audiologists; SLPs; speech, language, and hearing scientists; audiology and speech-language pathology support personnel; and students. Audiologists specialize in preventing and assessing hearing and balance disorders as well as providing audiologic treatment, including hearing aids. SLPs identify, assess, and treat speech, language, swallowing, and cognitive-communication disorders.

Providing gender-affirming voice therapy is within the SLP's scope of practice and may be done independently or as part of an interprofessional team focused on providing services related to vocal health and communication. They can help patients safely modify their voice and communication behaviors—including verbal and nonverbal communication, such as vocal pitch, intonation, voice quality, resonance, fluency, articulation, pragmatics, and vocalization (e.g., laughing)—through evidence-based interventions and patient-focused functional goals.

Gender-affirming voice therapy does not require surgery (though the services SLPs provide can support recovery from some surgical procedures), medication, or other physical interventions, but rather, simply helps individuals with strategies, techniques, and exercises to more closely align with their gender identity or expression. Without proper guidance and treatment, modifying usual pitch, adopting new mouth shapes, or producing the voice in a different way than usual can be arduous and potentially damaging, leading to problems like vocal fatigue and dysphonia (altered vocal quality), vocal cord nodules, polyps, or scarring.

ASHA is concerned with efforts to inhibit patient access to gender-affirming care and attempts to specifically restrict the ability of SLPs to provide gender-affirming voice therapy. We believe that all individuals, including those who are transgender and gender nonconforming and people with disabilities, have a right to bodily autonomy, self-determination, and equal access to health care.

Therefore, ASHA opposes the following amendments that could prevent such therapy from being provided to servicemembers, dependents, and veterans:

Rep. Norman (SC) #30: This amendment would prohibit access to certain gender-affirming care services for minor dependents who are enrolled in the Exceptional Family Member Program by virtue of a chronic condition, medical requirements, behavioral

health concern, or qualification for special education. This would unequally restrict access to care for covered dependents with disabilities.

Rep. Gaetz (FL) #320: This amendment would prohibit certain gender-affirming care at Department of Veterans Affairs facilities; thus, eliminating a benefit that currently exists for veterans and eligible family members.

Rep. Miller (IL) #694: This amendment would prohibit access to gender-affirming care for any individual covered by TRICARE and other health benefits, including for servicemembers and dependents. This would eliminate existing benefits for gender-affirming hormone therapy and mental health care for active-duty military and their families, as well as eliminate the ability of active-duty military to request a waiver for medically necessary gender-affirming surgery.

Ambiguity in the legislative language of these amendments about what constitutes a service, treatment, or procedure could impact the ability of SLPs to provide gender-affirming voice therapy to servicemembers, their dependents, and veterans, impairing their health and well-being and reducing troop morale and readiness. Consequently, ASHA urges the Committee not to make these amendments in order under the rule for consideration of H.R. 2670.

If you or your staff have any questions, please contact Eric Masten, ASHA's director of federal affairs, education, at emasten@asha.org.

Sincerely,



Robert M. Augustine, PhD, CCC-SLP
2023 ASHA President